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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000574

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV; USPACOM FOR FPA  
COMMERCE FOR ITA JEAN KELLY

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PINS](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: STATUS OF KAREN REFUGEE AND IDP RETURNS

REF: A. BANGKOK 3031

[B.](#) RANGOON 537

Classified By: COM Carmen M. Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: UNHCR's first assessment mission into Burma's south-eastern border area in early April found a heavy presence of Burmese Army troops and a lack of the basic infrastructure needed to support the tens of thousands of refugees projected to eventually return from Thailand. Though UNHCR continues planning for refugee repatriation, a formal SPDC-KNU political settlement remains a precondition for any returns, which UNHCR now doesn't expect to begin until early 2005. As for IDPs, a Rangoon-based Karen leader reports that if SPDC-KNU talks scheduled for late May are successful, Karen IDP resettlement could soon after begin in the Papun Township in eastern Karen State. END SUMMARY.

INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE

¶2. (C) Rangoon UNHCR Representative Rajiv Kapur told COM on April 8 that a UNHCR assessment team successfully surveyed three Karen townships in Tenasserim (Tanintharyi) Division in early April and determined that basic infrastructure needed to support the thousands of refugees that would return to that area was lacking. Besides finding approximately 25,000 Burmese Army troops garrisoned in the townships, in the 15 village tracts around Tavoy (Dawei) the SPDC has designated for settling returning refugees there is no significant local economy and no drinking water, and health clinics will be unable to adequately address returnee health issues. Though there are schools available, they have no furniture, books, or teachers. However, the Tavoy army commander facilitated a very well organized trip for UNHCR, indicating to UNHCR the SPDC is taking the return of refugees and IDPs seriously.

¶3. (C) Kapur described how 15 to 20 families had already spontaneously returned to the Tavoy area following the January SPDC-KNU verbal cease-fire agreement (ref A). He said UNHCR won't be able tell the difference between a returning refugee and a returning IDP, and admitted that he didn't think UNHCR should have to make a distinction since the reason for flight was exactly the same. Kapur also told us that according to the ICRC office in Tenasserim Division, the SPDC is not allowing IDPs and refugees to return to their original burned-out villages in what is now a no-man's land near the border. The government is settling the returnees further into the interior next to military bases, which could expose them to forced labor and forced contribution abuses in the future. Kapur forecast that the "right of return" to their original villages will become a main issue for UNHCR.

¶4. (C) Help may be on the way. A senior Karen community leader in Rangoon told us that Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and World Concern presented a plan April 26 on regional development to upgrade infrastructure in the areas the Karen refugees will return to. JICA's Rangoon representative said that JICA's Chairperson, Professor Ogata, has given her full support for infrastructure and social development in the Karen State. However, the GOB has not yet approved JICA's MOU application to conduct road building, irrigation, agriculture, malaria, and HIV/AIDS programs.

EFFECT FROM SPDC-KNU DELAY

¶5. (C) Regarding the recently postponed SPDC-KNU talks (ref A), Kapur later told Poloff UNHCR has made it very clear all along that an SPDC-KNU settlement is a precondition for any refugee repatriations. He added that the GOB hasn't asked UNHCR to begin any repatriations to date, and "from the UNHCR perspective that is fine because the earliest returns would be no sooner than early in 2005." Because of the lack of roads in the area and daunting logistics required, repatriations will have to be to only two or three areas at a time. For example, repatriating the 9,000 refugees to Tavoy requires bringing them from Thailand by sea. UNHCR will conduct a second assessment trip to the border area (COMMENT: Probably in eastern Karen State) in the near future, and is planning activities aimed at improving the situation for the population as a whole.

MEANWHILE, 100,000 IDPs IN THE WINGS...

16. (C) A Rangoon-based Karen religious leader reported that if an agreement is made during the next round of SPDC-KNU talks, Karen church groups will draw up a detailed resettlement plan for Karen IDPs, with the first returns going to Papun Township in eastern Karen State. The Karen leader said Karen religious groups had registered 100,000 Christian Karen IDPs inside the Burmese border.

17. (C) COMMENT: Once an SPDC-KNU settlement is agreed, the gate could open for a large influx of refugees and IDPs wanting to return to what are now economically stagnant and infrastructure-poor areas in Karen State, Mon State, and Tenasserim Division. The UNHCR assessment missions over the next several months, and NGO funding currently under consideration, will do much to help prepare for possible returns. END COMMENT.

Martinez